

Appleby Archaeology Group    November 2006

Those who braved the wet weather to attend the November meeting of Appleby Archaeology were stimulated by an informative talk from Kate Sharpe of Durham University on her current research into Cumbrian Rock Art.

Rock carvings made by Neolithic and early Bronze age people are found world wide but in this country they are seen in the north and west with Cumbria lying in the centre of the area which includes Northumberland, Durham, North Yorkshire, Argyle, Anglesey and the Boyne Valley. Cup marks are the most common symbol of these carvings, and they can appear singly, randomly clustered, and in dominant patterns such as rosettes and parallel lines. Rock art appears to be the earliest use of symbols for the purpose of communication.

No systematic surveys have been done of the rock art in Cumbria and most of the sites have been found by local people and visitors and it is probable that there is much more to be found. Ten years ago most rock art was associated with monuments and portable stones, particularly in the Eden Valley, with only twenty five per cent being part of the the landscape. This was not the case in Northumberland where sixty five per cent of the carvings were found on outcrops of rock. With recent local discoveries the balance has changed and now nearly half of Cumbrian rock art is associated with the landscape.

Kate spoke of six recent finds in Cumbria:- Patterdale in 1998, Copt Howe in Langdale in 1999, Loweswater in 2003, Buttermere in 2004 and Dungeon Ghyll and Grassmere in 2006. At some of the sites there are several adjacent panels of rock carvings. Most consist of cup marks which are small cavities made by hammering or pecking out the stone with a harder stone and these are best seen by looking down on them. The panels at Copt How are an exceptions as they are complex and on a vertical surface. A series of photographs of the panels from the six sites were shown and the audience's attention was drawn to some of the natural features of the rock and how these may have influenced the prehistoric carver.

It was suggested that the natural rock could have been an inspiration to the carver. Cup marks are often focused on natural markings as in Patterdale where they are seen within the fissures of the rock, the fissures appearing as a frame to the art. In another example the horizontal fissures were

natural but vertical lines had been carved across them. It is possible that Neolithic man thought of the natural features of the rock as being the art of his ancestors, and that that inspired him to add to them, much as graffiti is added to to-day.

Kate described the location of the six sites. The rocks on which art has been found tend to form large outcrops near becks or marshy ground and are low lying in valleys close to a lake. The significance of the location within the wider landscape is difficult to evaluate as the landscape would have been very different in Neolithic times when water levels were higher and there was more vegetation. The views we see today could be very different from those that the people saw when the carvings were made. The mountains may have been a focus. For example the panels of rock art in Dungeon Ghyll look towards The Pike of Stickle and the Langdale Fells and the outcrop at Grassmere focuses on the Lion and the Lamb. Another possibility is that there was an association with route ways. Mapping suggests that the sites occur where ancient route ways may have met. Some have suggested that they formed route markers.

The last part of the talk concerned geological issues and the difficulty of distinguishing rock art from natural weathering. We were told of some of the techniques to enhance the photographs of cup marks and some of the points, such as size and depth, which help the researcher reach a decision. The proximity of other panels, evidence of peck marks, though they should be viewed with caution as they can be imitated or polished off by weathering, patterning of the cup marks and the presence of other motifs all indicate that a feature may be rock art but Kate emphasised that it is never possible to be one hundred per cent certain.

In conclusion the audience enjoyed looking at a number photographs of cup marks and being asked to identify which of the marks were carved by man and which were the result of weathering. A number of questions were taken before Kate was thanked for a most interesting talk which had encouraged those present to go out and look for more examples of rock art.

The next meeting will be on the Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> December at 7.30pm in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby, when Gareth Davies will be talking on *The Sedgefield Project*- ten years of research of a Norfolk Parish

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